Visions of beauty transcend the boundries of age

by Mark Gordon

Each step in life is a preparation for another step. But this preparing for what comes next stops when people reach middle age, according to Reinhold Marxhausen.

No one prepares to get old, wrinkled and confined to a wheelchair, the Concordia art professor said. Some believe that only the young can be beautiful, but, he asked, "if we are made in the image of God, that should be true for our whole life."

Marxhausen's latest project is aimed at helping people cope with aging. Since December he has been spending his free time at the Seward Bethesda Care Center, taking pictures of the residents' world and the residents themselves.

There are actually two projects. The first will culminate in a slide show of beauty in the nursing home. It is part of Marxhausen's continuing "how to see" project which has taken him to the Hughes Brothers plant, Bankers Life Nebraska, Hampton, Lexington and Phoenix.

The second, he said, was an offshoot that just happened. Another art professor, Don Dynneson, took some sculpture students to the nursing home and while the residents worked with clay, the students sculpted them. Marxhausen went along and took pictures. He was fascinated by the people in the home and as he began work on the "how to see" series he found himself also taking pictures of the residents.

He made photocopies of the pictures, then took pencil and tempra and re-worked some of the photocopies. The finished photocopies were put on display in the hallway with a pencil and paper nearby so residents could comment on the images.

Marxhausen said most of the comments were favorable and the pictures spurred the residents to become better acquainted with one another.

From one photograph he made a large painting and using an overhead projector, he enlarged another and had patients trace it. The outlines were then filled in by residents to create a large picture. Unlike a painting which was created by an artist with little or no connection to the people at the care center, this image was actually made by the residents and was of someone they all knew.

Marxhausen said he was trying to get the residents to open up, to see their world and the people in it. Photocopies, he said, were more graphic, they emphasized the wrinkles and shapes of peoples' faces.

"I wasn't trying to glorify wrinkles," he said, "But I wanted them to accept the wrinkles. I wanted to say, 'this is where you're at right now.'

"I had a feeling they didn't like themselves," he said, adding that some people refused to believe that the pictures were of themselves. Instead they insisted they didn't look like that.

It was that denial that Marxhausen was working against in the project. He said people should use middle age to prepare for old age and old age to prepare for afterlife.

Most people spend their lives doing things for their bodies, but ignoring their souls, Marxhausen said. But in old age he believes people should concentrate on their souls, since the body is nearing its end.

Doing things for the soul, to Marxhausen, means enjoying the beauty of life and nature in all its forms, from the rays of golden sunshine shining through the mist onto a dew covered field to the soothing strains of a classical lullaby.

By showing people what they look like, Marxhausen said he hoped to get them to recognize that they are old and their bodies are temporary. By photographing the natural beauty around the nursing home, he hoped to show the residents that nature, like them, is always changing and that beauty can be anywhere one chooses to find it.

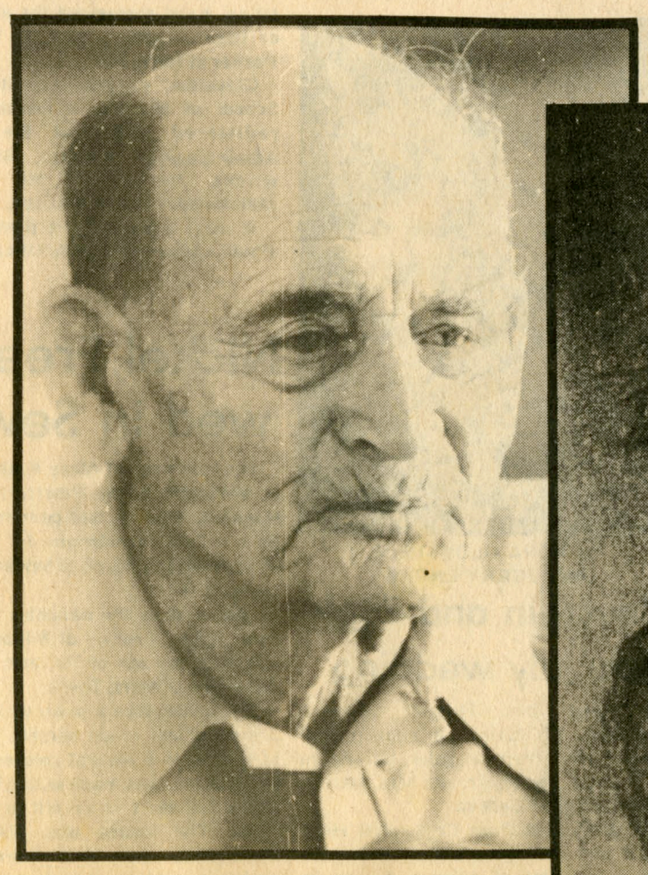
Some of the people, he said, consider the nursing home a jail. They complain because no one visits them and they can't leave, Marxhausen explained. He said his projects were attempts at showing them they aren't isolated from life, that life is all around them and all they have to do is open their eyes.

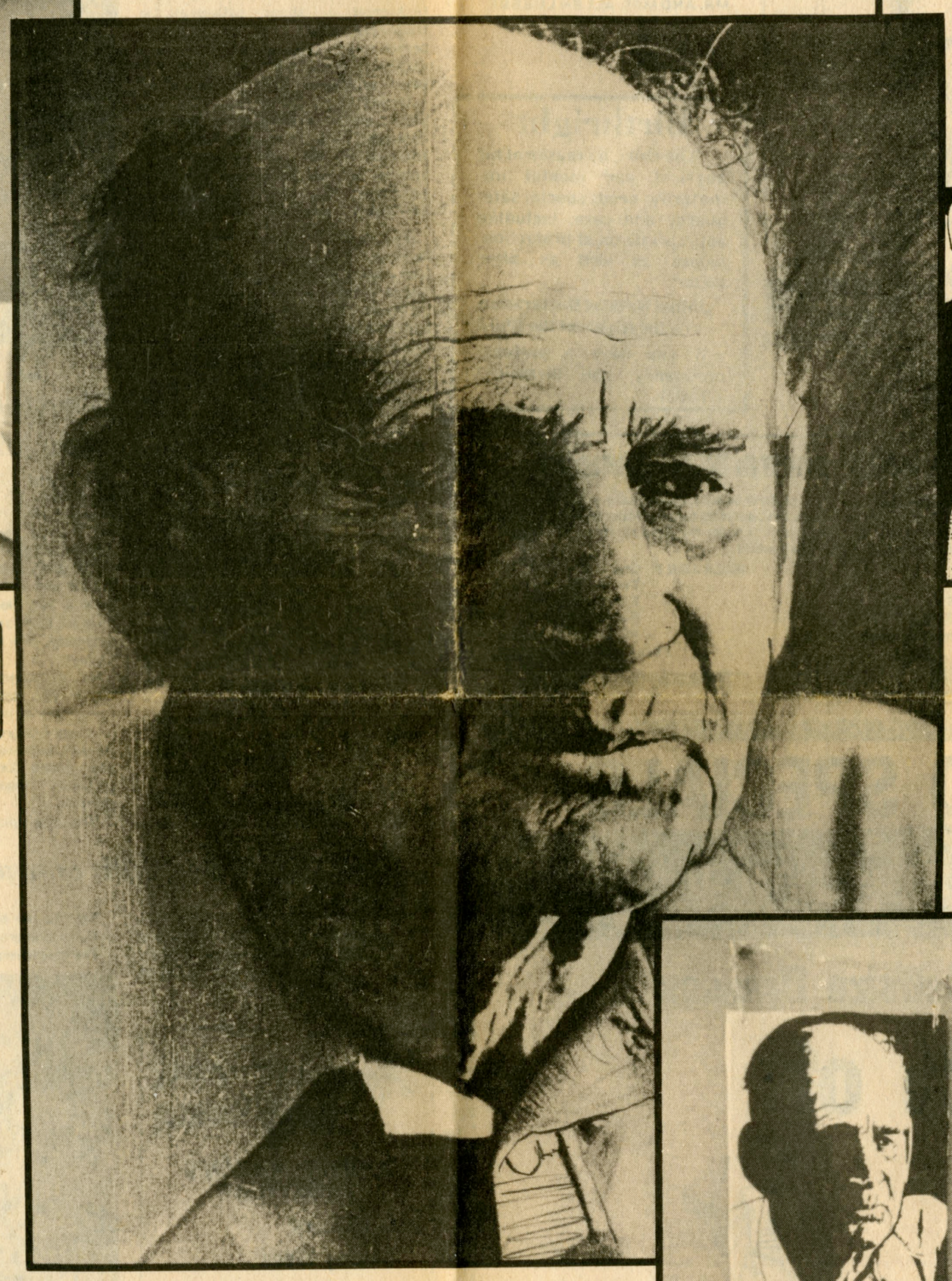
"It's their own fault they feel isolated," he said; "they don't want to see."

The slides Marxhausen took will be given to the home and his presentation of those slides will be recorded, so that future residents can better see their environment.

While the project uses the elderly for a subject, Marxhausen said it really is a project for people in middle age. Many of his works are temporary -- he makes sculptures and collages for single events then discards them -- but in this work it is his subjects who are fleeting. In a few years, he said, most of the people photographed will be gone, but for people in mid-age, the need to learn to cope with aging will still exist.

Funds for materials used came from the Seward Arts Council, Marxhausen said, while he donated his time. A slide show will be given May 25 at 2 p.m., and five of the slides will be made into large prints for permanent display in the home.





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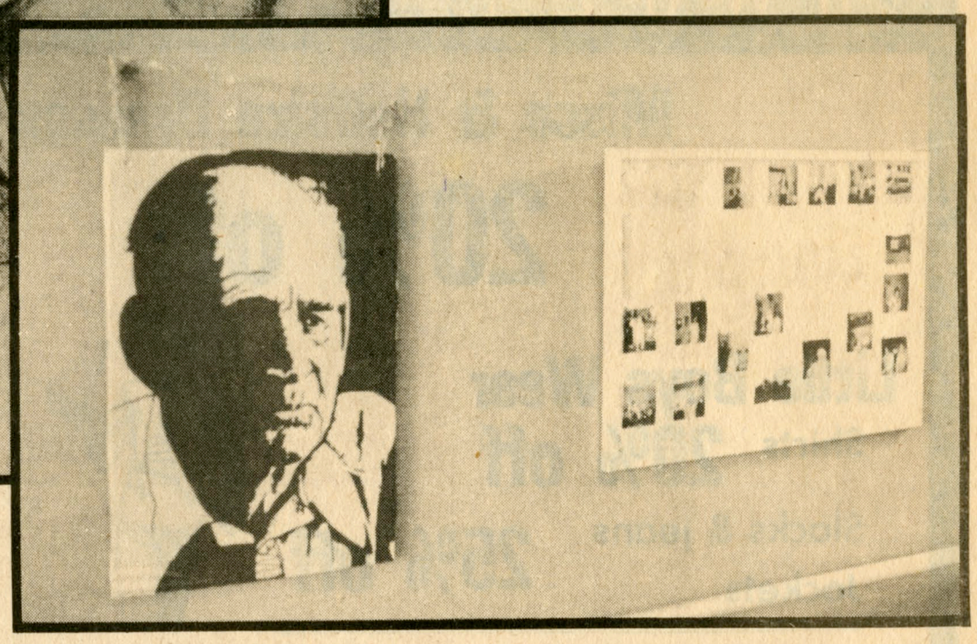

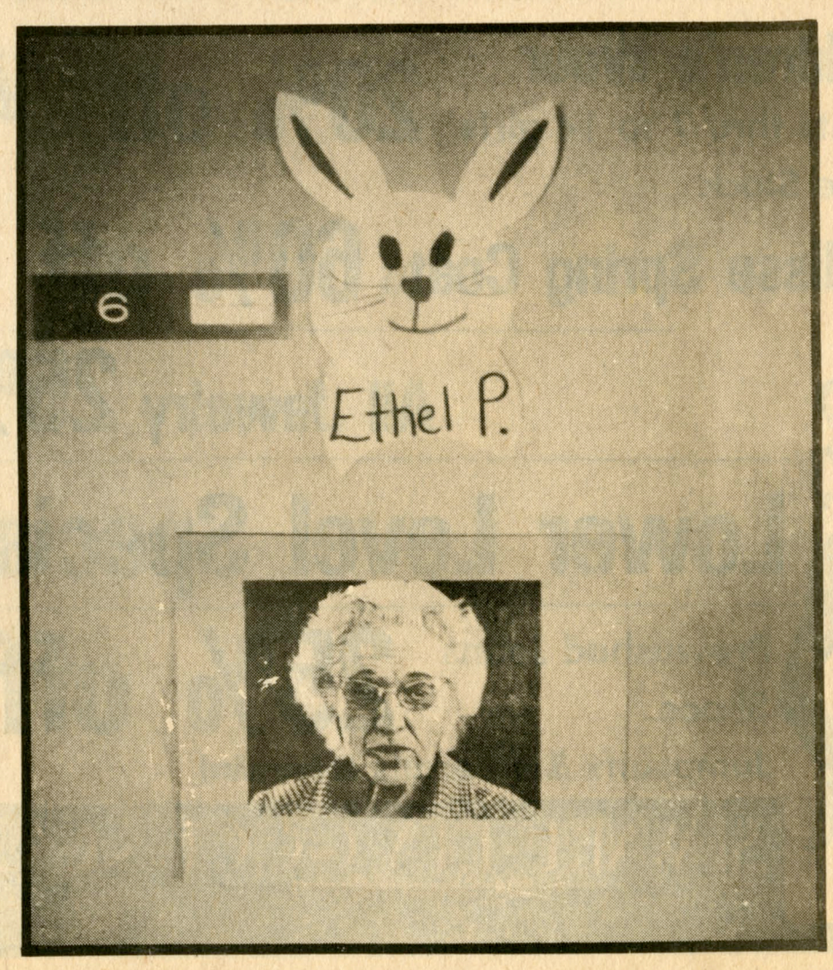

Marxhausen took photos of the residents (such as the one shown at top left), made photocopies, which he then reworked with pencil and tempra (center). With one photocopy he made a large tracing which residents painted and hung on display (center right). Some photocopies (top right) needed very little re-working. The drawings on photocopies were put on display at the home (above), then mounted and put on each resident's door (right).